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U.S. lawmakers are urging the Bush administration to reconsider proposed budgetary reductions that would end most radio broadcasting in the English language by government-funded Voice of America. VOA's Dan Robinson reports on a hearing on Capitol Hill examining broadcasting and public diplomacy efforts.

Reductions proposed by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the nine-member panel that oversees U.S. government-supported non-military international broadcasting, would end all English language radio programming by the Voice of America, except for programs transmitted to Africa.

Other cuts would affect radio broadcasts in Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek, and a number of Balkan languages, along with Tibetan, Thai, Cantonese, Hindi, and Portuguese to Africa.

The reductions come amid ongoing expansions in government-funded radio and television programming for the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan, for which Congress has provided increased funds since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Appearing before the committee, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes faced tough questioning from lawmakers who view the cuts as short-sighted and likely to undermine the ability of the U.S. to communicate abroad.

Congresswoman Nita Lowey chairs the House appropriations subcommittee on foreign operations.

"These cuts, while small in the grand scheme of things, loom large when looking at their effect on country programming, and will dampen our public diplomacy efforts," said Nita Lowey.

Hughes says the decision to slash VOA English, proposed as part of a \$668-million budget request for broadcasting, was made in a difficult budget environment. She says it was based on what she calls sound audience research.

"None of us wanted to have to make these decisions, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, it was a very, very difficult decision because we all believe in broadcasting," said Karen Hughes. "We believe in communicating with the world, we want to provide the Voice of America to the world. We tried to make difficult decisions as best we could, based on research."

However Minnesota Democrat Betty McCollum said broadcasting to the world in English is a comparatively inexpensive way for the U.S. to communicate. She accused the broadcasting board of trying to, in effect, silence the "global brand" of the United States.

"The audiences in fact are not dwindling," said Betty McCollum. "They are just being cut off. If you turn off a transmitter and then do a survey in a country of how many people are listening to VOA, it is going to go down, because they can't listen to Voice of America."

Republican Congressman Mark Kirk echoed the concerns, saying the broadcasting board should reassess its approach.

"One point six billion people on the planet speak English," said Congressman Kirk. "It is the main language of 71 countries. Al-Jazeera just committed \$1 billion a year in English for 24/7 broadcasting. So I am wondering if we can take a second look working with you on that."

Kirk also questioned reductions in one of three dialects of Tibetan broadcasted by the VOA and Radio Free Asia, as well as the elimination of Cantonese. Hughes had this response.

"[For] both RFA and VOA, the audiences [in Cantonese] were not measurable," she said. "VOA was less than one tenth of a percent, and we could not measure an audience for RFA broadcasts. So, again we based the decisions as best we could on research."

Hughes says eliminating broadcasts in one of three Tibetan dialects does not diminish the U.S. commitment to support human rights and liberties in Tibet.

Hughes also faced questions about a key element of the broadcasting structure, al-Hurra television for the Middle East.

The station was sharply criticized for airing remarks of Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, as well as a Palestinian radical who made anti-Israel and anti-American comments.

Critics, including pro-Israel groups, say the interviews amounted to the use of U.S. taxpayer dollars to support terrorists and undermine U.S. policy.

Hughes had this exchange with Steve Rothman.

ROTHMAN: "Why on God's Earth would we want to sponsor a live interview with Nasrallah?"

HUGHES: "Well we don't and that was a violation of our policy, that was a mistake that was a violation of our policy, I should have said that if I didn't say that earlier."

ROTHMAN: "I am glad to hear you say that."

HUGHES: "That was a mistake, it was a violation of our policy."

Hughes points to what she calls "comprehensive information" supporting programming reductions, saying the goal is to affect the fewest number of people based on audience research, while expanding transmissions to strategically-important countries like Iran, North Korea, and Somalia.

But Congresswoman McCollum, while challenging the statistics used to justify the cuts, said she wants the board to turn over to Congress the minutes of its meetings, which have been closed to the public on national security grounds.

She also urged that all radio and television stations under the board's responsibility be formally brought under the charter of VOA. The charter states that the long-term interests of the U.S. are served by communicating directly to the world by radio.

In her testimony on what she calls successful efforts to improve public diplomacy programs, Undersecretary Hughes told lawmakers she is committed to ensuring that the United States has a platform to broadcast credible news and information to counteract what she calls hate-filled and anti-American propaganda.